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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Rep. Charlie Melancon voted today in favor of the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act (H.R. 1538) to improve the health care our veterans receive. This bipartisan bill responds to the problems brought to light at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other military health care facilities by including provisions to: 1) improve the access to quality medical care for wounded service members who are outpatients at military health care facilities; 2) begin the process of restoring the integrity and efficiency of the disability evaluation system and taking other steps to cut bureaucratic red-tape; and 3) improve the transition of wounded service members from the Armed Forces to the VA system.

"We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our nation's veterans and it is our duty to provide them with the high-quality health care they deserve," said Rep. Melancon. "I've talked to many veterans in south Louisiana who are discouraged and frustrated with the red tape they have to deal with at the VA. Disabled veterans shouldn't have to wait for months to get the benefits they more than earned."

Rep. Melancon concluded, **"This bill, combined with the funding for veterans health care we added to the Iraq Supplemental, will be a shot in the arm for the overwhelmed and underperforming veterans' health care system."**

Last week, Rep. Melancon voted for the \$1.7 billion in additional funding for veterans' health care contained in the Iraq Emergency Supplemental. The funding will support the health care needs of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, including money for better mental health care and resources to improve VA health care facilities.

The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act will help our nation's veterans by:

- o **Improving the system of case managers for wounded service members.** The bill improves the training and reduces the caseloads of medical care case managers for outpatient wounded service members, so that service members and their families can get the help they

need when they need it. For example, the bill requires that case managers for outpatients handle no more than 17 cases and review each case at least once a week to better understand patient needs.

- o **Creating a system of patient advocates.** The bill also creates a system of patient advocates for outpatient wounded service members. These advocates are there to fight, when necessary, to ensure that outpatients get the right treatment. The bill limits patient advocates to a caseload of no more than 30 outpatients.

- o **Beginning the process of reforming the disability evaluation system.** The bill begins the process of reforming administrative processes in order to restore the integrity and efficiency of the disability evaluation system. For example, the bill requires DOD to establish a standardized training program and curriculum for those involved in the disability evaluation system.

- o **Improving the transition of wounded service members from the Armed Forces to the VA.** Finally, the bill takes some substantive steps in reducing the turmoil of being transferred from military to veterans' medical care for service members who are discharged. The bill creates a formal transition process from the Armed Forces to the VA for service members who are being retired or separated for health reasons. The transition is to include an official handoff between the two systems with the electronic transfer of all medical and personnel records before the member leaves active-duty.

- o **Establishing a toll-free hot line.** The bill requires DOD to establish a toll-free hot line for reporting deficiencies in facilities supporting medical patients and family members, requiring rapid responses to remediate substantiated complaints.

- o **Establishing independent medical advocates.** The bill also establishes an independent medical advocate to serve as a counselor and advisor for service members being considered by medical evaluation boards.

o **Calling for improved training.** The bill requires DOD to recommend annually improvements in the training of health care professionals, medical care case managers, and patient advocates to increase their effectiveness in assisting recovering wounded warriors. The bill, at a minimum, requires DOD to make recommendations about improving training in the identification of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies, and other mental conditions among recovering service members.

o **Creating an Army Wounded Warrior Battalion pilot program.** The bill requires the Army to establish an Army Wounded Warrior Battalion pilot program at an installation with a major medical facility modeled after the Wounded Warrior Regiment program in the Marines. The unit is intended to track active-duty soldiers in "outpatient status" who still require medical care.

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